

the old-catholic church of the netherlands

by
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St. Willibrord

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The bishops of the Old-Catholic Church of the Netherlands offer you this booklet as a small token of their great gratitude for the help, which so many people in America and England, Sweden and Switzerland, rendered to the Church of Utrecht after the disastrous years of 1940—1945.

THE OLD-CATHOLIC CHURCH OF THE NETHERLANDS.

WHAT is the Old-Catholic Church of the Netherlands? In the following few pages we will try to give a satisfactory answer to this question.

For this purpose we must go back far into the past. Towards the end of the 7th century, St. Willibrord, a missionary from England, succeeded in finally introducing Christianity into the Low Countries near the sea.

The inhabitants of these regions, near the mouths of the rivers Rhine and Meuse, were liberty-loving Frisians, who were, indeed, willing to accept the Gospel out of the hands of the English missionary, but not of the Frankish conqueror.

Of course the Frankish Kings exercised great influence on the Church after it had once been established and by rich gifts they also supported it in its mission-task and general cultural work.

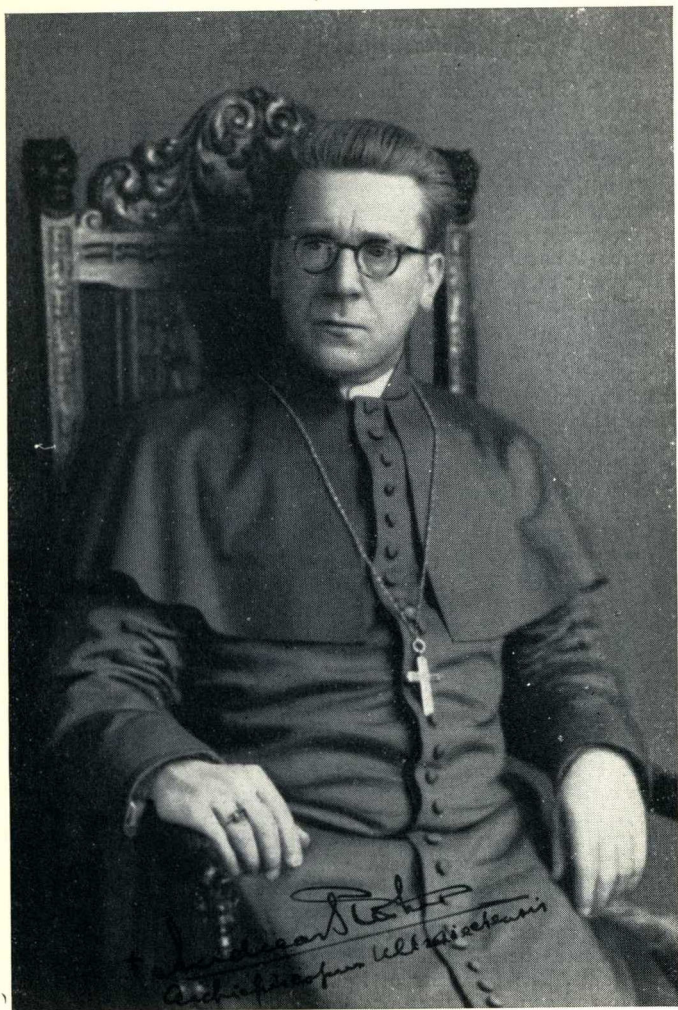
In this way the mission Church developed into the Church of Utrecht, with Willibrord as its first Archbishop. The present Archbishop Andreas Rinkel is Willibrord's successor in the direct line.

In the **middle-ages** the bishops of Utrecht were not only Princes of the Church, they were also temporal Princes, ruling an extensive part of the country. It is easy to understand that this combination of spiritual and temporal power in one hand often had a bad effect on the affairs of the diocese. Yet it must be said that many of these Prince-bishops were men of great piety and eminent scholars. Among these we may mention bishop Bernold or Bernulf (1027—1054), founder of the famous St. Paul's abbey in Utrecht and of the minsters of St. Peter and St. John. He was a friend to the German Emperors and at the same time the most powerful Prince-bishop in these parts. One of his episcopal garments, the alb, is still to be seen in the Old-Catholic Museum at Utrecht.

That in these times the bishops of Utrecht felt themselves free shepherds of their flock, independent of the Pope, they clearly showed in the turbulent times of the investiture-conflict.

Bishop William (1054—1076) and his successor bishop Conrad took the side of their liege-lord, the German Emperor and not of pope Gregory VII.

All the same the **papal influence** was continually increasing also in the diocese of Utrecht. The Chapters tried to maintain their



Dr. Andreas Rinkel, the present Archbishop of Utrecht.

ancient rights, among others that of electing their own bishops, in spite of the papal claims to power and authority. This was seen at the time of the schism in the diocese of Utrecht (1423—1432) when the Chapter elected Rudolf van Diepholt and Pope Martinus V appointed Zweder of Culemborg. The conflict did not come to an end until Pope Eugenius IV reversed the decree of his predecessor and finally recognized Rudolf as bishop of Utrecht.

It will be easily understood that all this strife was by no means conducive to raising the spiritual level of the Church. Hence it is a sad picture which the Church of Utrecht presents to us towards the end of the middle-ages, but yet far less sad than in other parts of Europe. For in these Low Countries there appeared spiritual currents, the influence of which was a blessing to the country far and wide, and which, no doubt, were the source from which the Dutch Catholics of the 16th and 17th centuries drew the strength to stand firm during the storms of the Reformation, which threatened to wipe the old Catholic Church of Utrecht out of existence. Here we think of the „**Modern Devotion**”, this revival of religious feeling of the 14th and 15th centuries, which wanted to make the Gospel faith again a matter of the heart and purge it from all superstition. On purity of heart, love of one's neighbour, and self denial full stress was laid by the Brothers of Common Life as they were called. The convent of Windesheim near Zwolle became the centre of this Modern Devotion. Many convents at home and abroad joined the Windesheim Congregation and did their best that this spirit of devotion might find acceptance everywhere.

Geert Groote, Wessel Gansfort and Hendrik Mande are names well-known and highly honoured, not only in this country but also abroad. Who does not know the beautiful fruit of this spiritual movement, the splendid little book: „The Imitation of Christ” by Thomas à Kempis?

But even this movement was not able to raise the Church permanently out of its condition of utter spiritual and moral decay. The reform in „head and limbs” was so long delayed that it was too late. The **Reformation came**, and with it for the Church of Utrecht an exceedingly hard period of persecution and strife. Perhaps the saddest part of it was that the fight had to be fought on two fronts, on one side against the aggressive Calvinists, on the other against the hords of the Contra-Reformation, the Jesuits.

In Trente the Church had pronounced its „No” against the Protestants. The followers of Ignatius had to emphasize this „no” to save and consolidate the position of the Church and of the Pope at any cost, if need be at the cost of the Gospel. They did so,



Alb of St. Bernulf (1027—1054).

indeed. They identified the Church and the world even more than in former times. They made the Church a political instrument of power, enthroned papalism, strangled episcopatism and finally deformed Catholicism to Romanisme.

In the diocese of Utrecht they also made their influence felt in a formidable manner. The ecclesiastic and social conditions had become exceedingly confused and difficult, owing to the rising Reformation and the struggle with Spain. The King of Spain made a last endeavour to preserve the Low Countries for the Church: the Bishopric of Utrecht was raised to Archbishopric with Groningen, Leeuwarden, Deventer, Haarlem and Middelburg as suffragan bishoprics. It was of no use. This new arrangement was of too clear a Spanish-political character to hold back the Reformation or the rebellion.

Then the storm broke out over the old Church of this Country and many thousands seceded, partly from social-political-, partly from religious motives. The truly devout catholics in this Country, however, realized how precious a heritage was in danger of being lost. To be sure, they too wanted Church-reform, abolishment of abuses, the weeding of superstition, but without radically breaking with tradition. For this would mean denying the working of God's Ho'y Ghost in his Church. No, what had been handed down should be purified, everything that was not in accordance with the Scriptures, rejected, but the tie connecting them with the Church of all ages, should not be broken.

Under these circumstances there slowly arose a **Church, oppressed indeed, but purified**, one that had to take refuge to Churches hidden from view behind house-fronts and warehouses, places of worship, however, showing a beauty and piety, together with a simplicity and dignity, expressive of the spirit of devotion of purified Catholicism of the 17th and the 18th centuries.

Not only the Church, also the hierarchy had suffered severely. The new bishoprics had been orphaned. The Archbishops could only discharge their duties under an assumed name and amidst the greatest difficulties and dangers. And there was so much to be done! For the flock was still a very large one, even though it seemed as if the Calvinists, holding the reins of government firmly in their hands, were in the majority.

But the difficulties arose not only from the side of the Calvinists. No, the Jesuits from abroad saw a favourable field of activity here to bring the lost sheep back to the fold. Very soon their mentality proved to be quite different from that of the Dutch



The Old-Catholic Museum for Church Art and History in the Netherlands, established in the former hidden Church of St. Gertrude at Utrecht.

clerus. And then a secret, unrelenting struggle began between the clergy of the Church of Utrecht and the priests of different orders, — discord where unity was so much needed. Here the clergy did not want to work according to Jesuit recipe. The bishops wished to maintain their own independance and refused to be will-less servants of Rome. Then suspicions were fastened on them in Rome. At first without much effect. No wonder. A man like Johannes van Neercassel († 1686) was too highly respected in the Catholic world, also outside the Netherlands, on account of his great devotion, for base insinuations to harm him. But what had not succeeded with Neercassel, did succeed with his successor Petrus Codde, who became the victim of the Jesuit intrigues. He was deprived of his episcopal dignity and everything was done to lend a colour of legitimacy to this action. A new meaning was now given to the title of Vicarius Apostolicus (a term come into use since the Reformation) which Codde and his predecessors had borne and it was falsely represented as if there had been no bishops of Utrecht for nearly two centuries.

The **protests** made by the **Chapter** of Utrecht were ignored. The last stronghold of Episcopalism, of non-Jesuitical devotion had to be destroyed. But the Church of Utrecht was not prepared to bow before this Jesuit-papal striving after power. It maintained its rights and elected Cornelius Steenoven Archbishop of Utrecht, and in so doing gave evidence of not having fallen a victim to the levelling process which threatened to suppress all independent thinking in the Church of Rome. Rome's answer may be imagined: excommunication. And then the Jesuits set to work with all means at their disposal: a Church, organized according to Jesuit ideas, was to replace the ancient Church of this country. But the Church of Utrecht stood firm, no matter how Rome made use of the powerful weapons at her command.

It has sometimes been represented as if the struggle was only a matter of rights. This must be emphatically denied. Greater issues were at stake: nothing less than the spiritual inheritance of the Church of Utrecht and the salvation of Catholicism from the grasp of the more and more deformed „Roman“-Catholicism.

For Utrecht the Scriptures and Tradition were and are the sources of Catholic faith, in such a manner that Tradition can never add anything to or take away from the Scriptures. For Rome Tradition came to stand above the Scriptures and was finally embodied in the Pope (1870). In this way the Church of Rome had opened the door wide to any de- or transformation of the Gospel.

But all this did not come to pass without a great many struggles.

The best sons of the Church were often expelled for the sake of this striving after power by the Pope.

So in France the cloister of Port Royal, which in difficult times had often been such a great moral support and example, was razed to the ground.

Great were the troubles of the little Church of Utrecht, which seemed not to be equal to the enormous responsibility and almost unsurmountable difficulties. But they were surmounted.

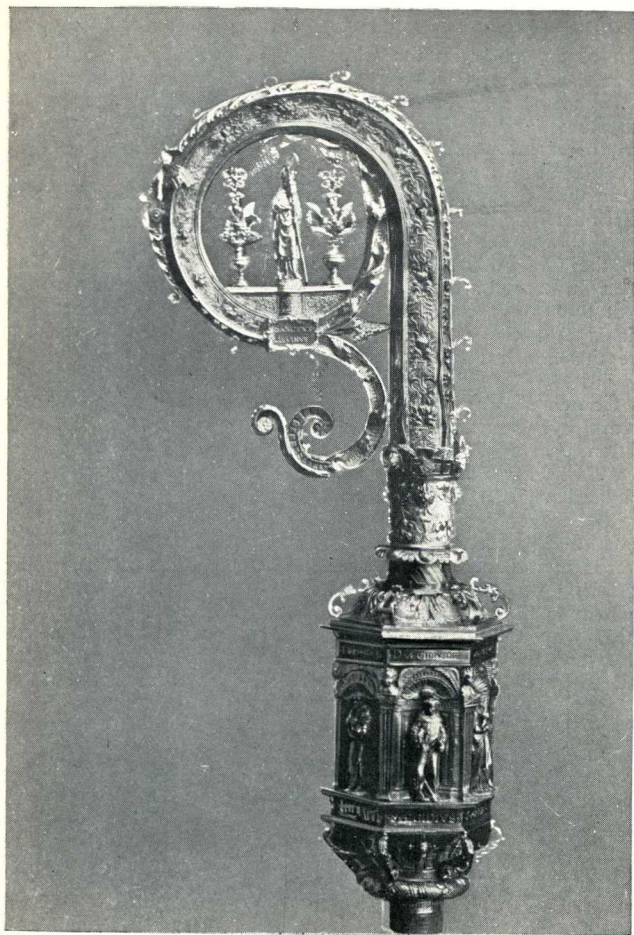
A Seminary of their own was opened at Amersfoort (1725). In 1763 a provincial Council was held to define the proper attitude, on one side against the doctrines of the Jesuits, which affected the foundations of the Catholic faith, but on the other side against radicalism within their own ranks, which threatened to throw overboard parts of the faith handed down to them. To be sure, they still looked forward to a reunion with Rome and passed over many things which afterwards would have to be discussed. They dared not yet undertake the task of a thorough purification such as we might perhaps have expected. It is well that they did not set to work rashly. The fault of rashness had to be avoided. This work, too, had to grow under the guidance of God's holy Ghost. A century later, after 1870, many things which in the course of centuries had gone wrong, were put right, partly owing to the influence of the growing Old-Catholic Churches abroad.

Among other things the native language was introduced in the Liturgy, which thus became better understood by the congregation. Excesses in the worship of the Virgin Mary and other Saints were no longer tolerated. The Sacraments of Penitance and the extreme Unction of the Sick were explained in their original christian meaning, so that here, too, all superstition was removed.

To the priest the right place was assigned of a servant and shepherd, not of an intermediary and ruler. To the layman was pointed out his personal responsibility, which he could not, on any condition, shift over to the priest.

Thus the old catholic faith was really restored and lived up to again. To Protestantism could be shown a rich Tradition of ages, containing a wealth of devotion, which supplements the Scriptures, but does not contradict it in any way. This Tradition begins with the Apostles and not with Luther or Calvin!

It is a logical consequence that the Old-Catholic Church of to day has thus been placed in the centre of oecumenical discussions of the Churches as a clear example that Catholicism is possible



Part of the crozier of the bishop of Deventer (1570).

without being Romish and that Evangelic Catholicism is also possible. Just because it is a little church it more sharply feels the pain of dissension in the Church, the body of Christ, which should be one. It feels its faults and extends the hand of friendship to all, without becoming untrue to itself, ever an exhorting example both to Rome and to Protestantism, ever again testing itself to the Scriptures and Tradition.

With the Anglican Church an intercommunion was brought about and with the Eastern Orthodox Church the ties of friendship became firmer.

Thus the Old-Catholic Church of to-day is placed before this important task: amid the **oecumenical discussions** to remain the representative of pure old Catholicism. The bishop's see of Utrecht is still the one round which all Old-Catholics gather, because this see has stood the storms of ages.

The Church of Utrecht has suffered heavy losses, especially in the years of the second world-war and during the German occupation. Amongst others the old hidden church at Rotterdam, which with its most precious inventory was entirely destroyed by the bombardement in 1940; the church at den Helder pulled down during the occupation. But a number of new churches have also been built during the last decades, among them the fine cathedrals of Utrecht and Haarlem.

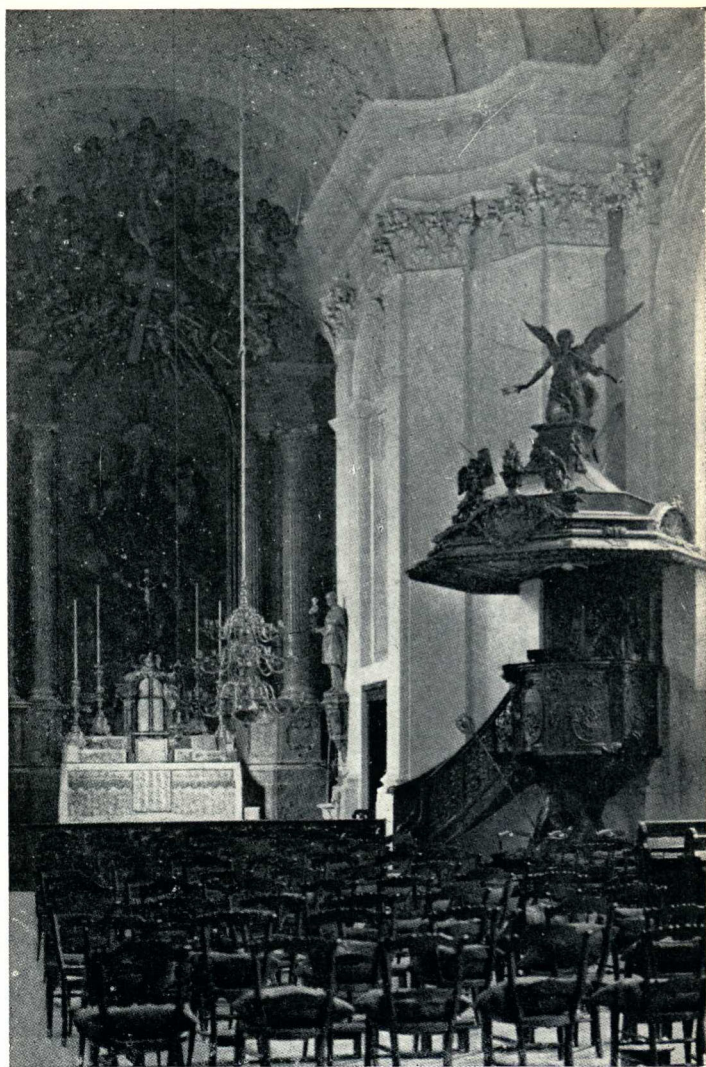
A growing corporate life, freely reviving after the war, forms a bond among the members, also outside the Church.

In this way the Church of Utrecht, though few in number, goes forward full of courage, mindful of its important task and mission: to be the bearer and representative of ideal Catholicism.

Amersfoort, June 1948.



St. Nicholas' church at Krommenie with the Rectory. This typical hidden church, from the beginning of the 17th century, was originally a barn, the farm-house was fitted up as rectory. Very fine is the Zaanland front of the rectory.



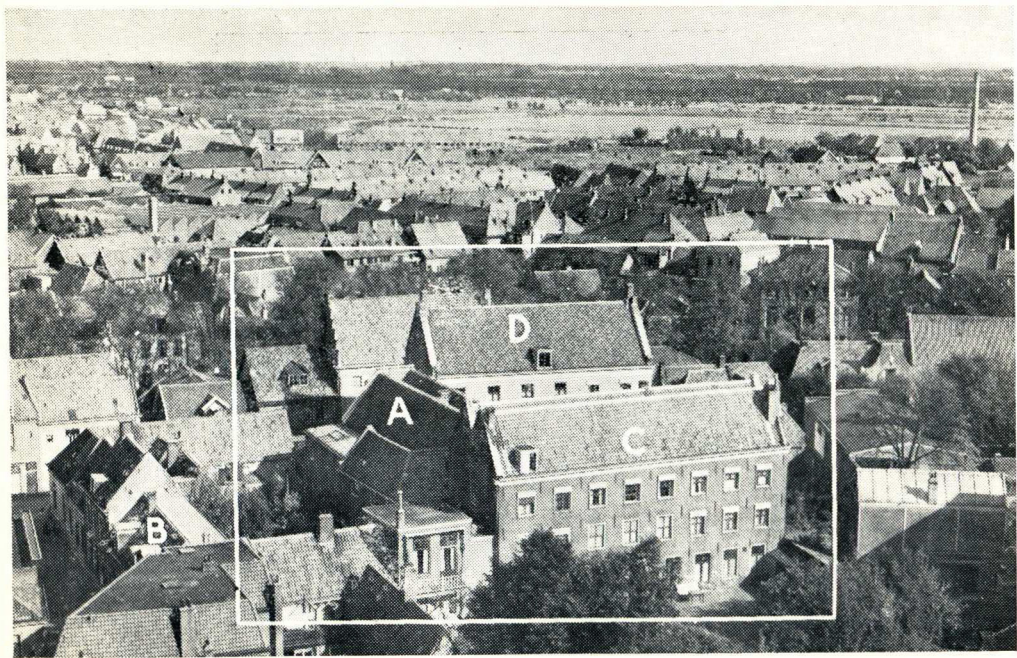
St. James and St. Augustine's church at the Hague, a hidden church from the beginning of the 18th century, one of the most beautiful churches of the Netherlands and of Europe.



Johannes Baptista van Neercassel, Archbishop of Utrecht (1662—1686).



Cornelius Steenoven, Archbishop of Utrecht (1723—1725).



The Old-Catholic Seminary at Amersfoort (1725).

- A. Chapel of St. Willibrord and St. Boniface, built in 1696.*
- E. House of the Principal.*
- C. Building for the students.*
- D. Building for the pupils of the Gymnasium, a school for Classical education, the final examination of which is at the same time the entrance into the University.*



Church of St. Laurence and St. Mary Magdalen at Rotterdam, a hidden church from the beginning of the 18th century, destroyed in 1940, by the German bombardment of Rotterdam.



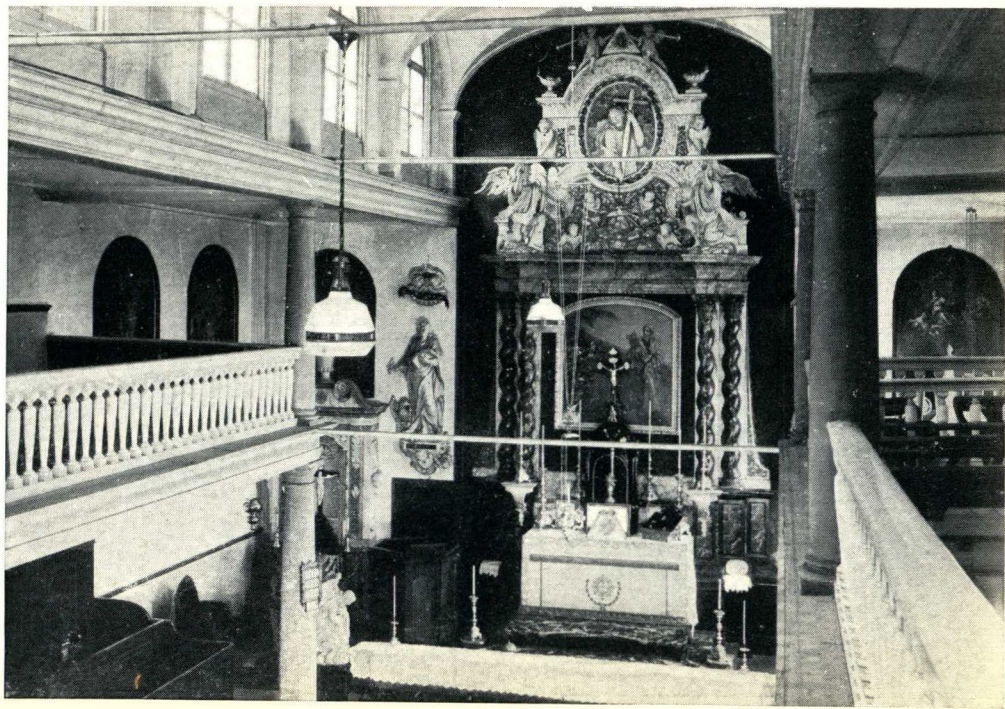
Remains of the church building, destroyed on May 14th, by the German bombardment of Rotterdam.



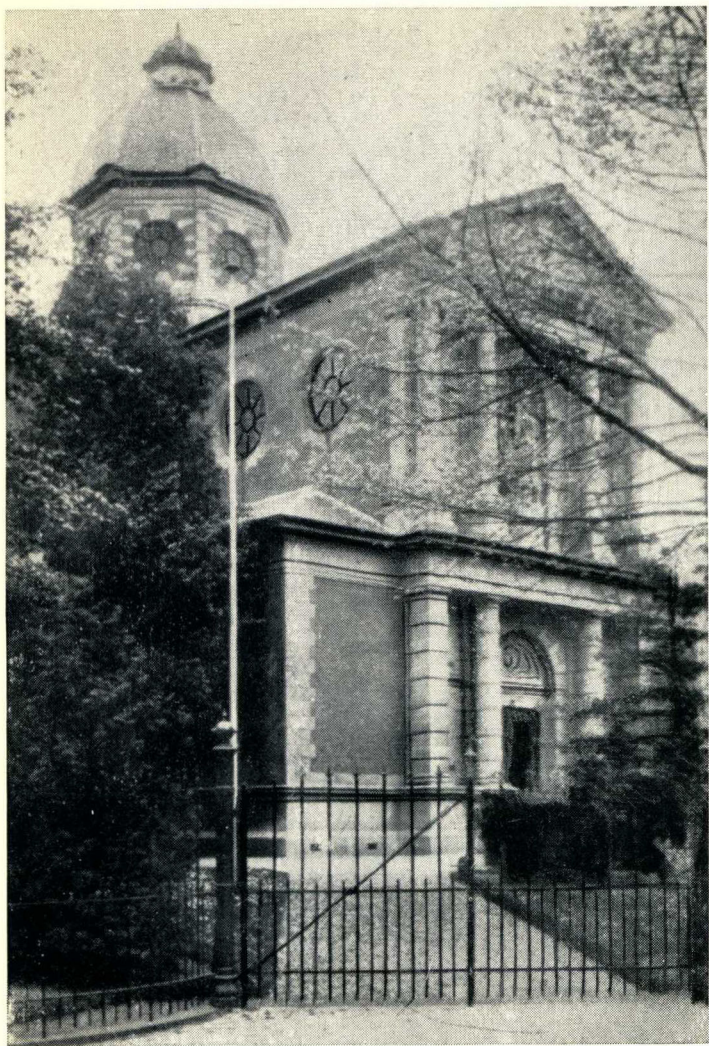
St. Gertrude's Cathedral at Utrecht (1914).



St. Ann and St. Mary's Cathedral at Haarlem (1938).



Hidden church of St. John and St. Willibrord at Amsterdam.



St. Vitus' church at Hilversum (1888).